

# **From Cruelty to Homicide: A Criminological Analysis of Carroll Edward Cole**

## **Executive Summary**

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the life and crimes of American serial killer Carroll Edward Cole, with a specific focus on the developmental trajectory from childhood animal cruelty to adult serial murder. The findings establish that Cole's acts of animal abuse were not incidental but were foundational events in his evolution as a predator. The analysis demonstrates a clear causal link between the profound and specific nature of the maternal abuse he endured and the violent psychopathology he developed. Cole's case is examined through the lens of the "Graduation Hypothesis," a criminological theory he exemplifies, which posits that violence against animals serves as a form of methodological rehearsal for future violence against humans. Furthermore, the report argues that Cole's murders were driven by a core psychological compulsion: a displaced matricidal rage, wherein his victims served as surrogates for the mother he obsessively hated. The investigation also highlights the repeated and tragic failures of the mental health and criminal justice systems, which, despite Cole's own pleas for intervention, failed to prevent his escalation from violent ideation to homicidal action. Ultimately, Carroll Edward Cole emerges as a quintessential case study in the developmental psychology of a serial killer, offering an uncommonly clear illustration of how severe childhood trauma can forge a violent offender.

## **Section 1: The Forging of a Predator: Childhood and Adolescence (1938-1959)**

The violent trajectory of Carroll Edward Cole was not the product of spontaneous evil but was systematically forged in the crucible of a traumatic childhood. The abuse he suffered was profound and multifaceted, establishing a psychological foundation of rage, confusion, and a

compulsion for violence that would define his life. His formative years were characterized by a direct and predictable progression from victim to predator, with his first acts of killing serving as critical milestones in this development.

**Table 1: Chronology of Violence and Key Life Events**

Year	Age	Event
1938	0	Born Carroll Edward James Cole in Sioux City, Iowa. <sup>1</sup>
1939-1943	1-5	Family moves to Richmond, California; father, LaVerne, leaves for WWII. <sup>1</sup>
1943	5	Mother, Vesta, begins extramarital affairs, forcing Cole to witness them and beating him to ensure his silence. <sup>2</sup>
~1943-1945	5-7	Vesta subjects Cole to ongoing psychological abuse, including dressing him in girls' clothing. <sup>1</sup>
1945	7	Father returns from war; physical beatings from mother cease. Teasing from peers over his "girly name" intensifies. Cole strangles the family puppy in a reported "blackout". <sup>2</sup>
1946	8	Cole drowns classmate Duane, a boy who had teased him, an act he later linked to his obsession with

		his mother. <sup>1</sup>
1953	14	Despite a tested IQ of 152, Cole is a poor student, engaging in petty crime and heavy drinking. <sup>2</sup>
1958-1960	20-22	Receives a bad-conduct discharge from the U.S. Army; attacks two couples on a lover's lane. <sup>1</sup>
1971	32	Commits his first confirmed adult murder, strangling Essie Louise Buck in San Diego. <sup>1</sup>
1980	42	Arrested in Dallas, Texas, for the murder of Wanda Faye Roberts, leading to his confession to numerous other killings. <sup>1</sup>
1984	45	Mother Vesta Cole dies. <sup>1</sup> Cole's attitude reportedly changes; he waives appeals and seeks the death penalty. <sup>1</sup>
1985	47	Executed by lethal injection at Nevada State Prison on December 6. <sup>1</sup>

## A Foundation of Turmoil

Carroll Edward Cole was born on May 9, 1938, in Sioux City, Iowa.<sup>1</sup> His life was destabilized early when the family moved to Richmond, California, and his father, LaVerne, departed to serve in World War II.<sup>1</sup> This left young Carroll under the exclusive and destructive influence of his mother, Vesta Cole. During this period, Cole also began to experience social antagonism

from his peers, who relentlessly teased him about his "girly name".<sup>1</sup> This external mockery of his masculinity created a deep-seated vulnerability that his mother's subsequent abuse would cruelly exploit and amplify.

## **The Tyranny of Vesta Cole**

The abuse inflicted by Vesta was not merely physical; it was a calculated psychological dismantling of her son's identity. Beginning when Cole was just five years old, Vesta forced him to accompany her on her extramarital affairs, making him wait in strange apartments while she engaged in what he described as "drunken sex".<sup>2</sup> To ensure his silence, she would beat him and twist his arm, creating a toxic association in his mind between female sexuality, betrayal, and violence.<sup>2</sup>

Even more damaging was the targeted psychological abuse centered on his gender. Vesta insisted on dressing Cole in girls' clothing and forcing him to serve tea to neighborhood women, a profound form of humiliation for a boy already being taunted for his name.<sup>1</sup> This systematic assault on his masculinity is a crucial factor in understanding his later pathology. Psychiatrists would later diagnose him with "confusion concerning sexual identification," a direct outcome of this abuse.<sup>2</sup> His father's return from the war offered no relief; Cole perceived him as weak and dominated by Vesta, leaving him without a male role model to counteract the psychological emasculation he was experiencing.<sup>4</sup>

## **The First Killings: Rehearsal in Violence**

Cole's first killings were not simple childhood misdeeds but critical developmental steps on his path to becoming a serial murderer. In 1945, at age seven, amid intense teasing from peers, Cole claimed he "blackout & awoke to find he had strangled the family's puppy".<sup>2</sup> This event marks the first physical manifestation of his homicidal rage and, critically, established strangulation as his preferred method of exerting control and power. The claim of a "blackout" suggests a dissociative state, a common psychological mechanism to cope with acts that are both gratifying and horrifying to the perpetrator.

A year later, at age eight, his violence escalated to a human target. He drowned a schoolmate, Duane, who was among those who had teased him.<sup>1</sup> While the immediate trigger appeared to be peer torment, Cole later revealed a far deeper motivation. In a press interview conducted decades later, he connected this first human murder directly to his mother, stating, "I was

primed, I had made the mental commitment I was going to get even with my mother, and things just built up and built up and became an obsession".<sup>1</sup> This powerful confession is the lynchpin of his entire psychological profile. It demonstrates that from a very young age, his violent acts were a form of displaced aggression. The rage he felt toward his powerful and untouchable mother was redirected onto a weaker, more accessible target. The successful murder of Duane provided a potent release for this rage, reinforcing a psychological pathway where homicide became the ultimate coping mechanism for his emotional torment. This act "primed" him, solidifying murder as a viable solution in his mind and setting the stage for his future crimes.

## **Section 2: The "Graduation Hypothesis" in Practice: From Animal Cruelty to Human Violence**

Carroll Cole's history of animal abuse provides a stark and compelling case study for criminological theories that link cruelty to animals with subsequent violence against humans. His actions were not random acts of sadism but rather a clear and logical progression in which he honed his methods and desensitized himself to the act of killing. This developmental process aligns perfectly with the tenets of the "Graduation Hypothesis."

### **Theoretical Framework: The MacDonald Triad and Beyond**

For decades, criminologists have sought to identify childhood predictors of adult violence. An early and influential theory was the MacDonald Triad, which identified three behaviors—animal cruelty, fire-setting, and persistent bed-wetting—as potential warning signs for future aggression.<sup>6</sup> While this triad has been influential, modern criminology often favors more nuanced models like the "Graduation Hypothesis." This theory posits that some offenders begin with violence against animals and "graduate" to violence against humans.<sup>7</sup> Animals are chosen as initial victims because they are vulnerable and unable to retaliate, making them low-risk targets for a budding predator to rehearse methods, build confidence, and become desensitized to the act of killing.<sup>7</sup> Carroll Cole is frequently cited in academic literature as a primary example of this hypothesis in action.<sup>7</sup>

### **From Puppy to Person: A Pattern of Strangulation**

The link between Cole's animal cruelty and his human murders is exceptionally direct. The strangulation of the family puppy at age seven was a methodological rehearsal for his entire criminal career.<sup>2</sup> His signature method of murder as an adult was strangulation, the same technique he first employed on a defenseless animal.<sup>1</sup> Research into the Graduation Hypothesis specifically notes that offenders often use the same killing method on both animal and human victims, a pattern Cole demonstrates with textbook clarity.<sup>7</sup> The act provided him with tactile experience in the mechanics of killing by strangulation and psychologically reinforced it as his preferred means of exerting ultimate control. It was a blueprint for the murders of his five convicted victims and the dozens more he claimed to have killed.<sup>1</sup>

## **Escalation and Paraphilia: The Killing of Kittens**

Cole's animal cruelty did not end in childhood. As an adult, following a period of intense sexual frustration after being jilted by a fiancée, he admitted that he "got pleasure from killing kittens by wringing their necks".<sup>4</sup> This later instance of animal abuse marks a critical evolution in his psychopathology. Unlike the puppy incident, which he framed as a dissociative "blackout," the killing of the kittens was a conscious, premeditated act directly linked to pleasure and sexual gratification.

This behavior occurred during a period when his violent sexual fantasies were intensifying. He had begun experimenting with non-lethal strangulation of his girlfriends during sex to heighten his own excitement.<sup>4</sup> This demonstrates a clear psychological progression where the act of killing was no longer just an outlet for rage but had become inextricably fused with his sexual arousal. The kittens served as proxies for the women in his fantasies, and killing them provided a sadistic thrill that he was beginning to crave. This transition from reactive violence to proactive, pleasure-seeking violence marks his full development into a sexual sadist and lust murderer.

## **Section 3: Matricidal Rage: The Displacement of Hatred**

The central, animating force behind Carroll Cole's decades-long reign of terror was a singular, unresolved, and all-consuming rage directed at his mother, Vesta. His entire murderous career

can be understood as a ritualistic displacement of this matricidal obsession, with each of his victims serving as a surrogate for the woman he hated but could never bring himself to harm directly.

## **"Getting Even with My Mother"**

Unlike many serial killers whose motives must be inferred, Cole was remarkably articulate and consistent about his primary driver. In numerous interviews and confessions, he stated plainly that his murders were a way to "get back at" his mother.<sup>10</sup> His statement linking the childhood murder of his classmate Duane to his "mental commitment I was going to get even with my mother" reveals that this matricidal rage was the foundational element of his violent identity from as early as age eight.<sup>1</sup> This was not a justification conceived in retrospect but an "obsession" that festered for his entire life, fueling every subsequent act of violence.

## **The Victim as Surrogate**

Cole's victim selection process was a direct manifestation of this displaced hatred. He almost exclusively targeted women who, in his distorted perception, embodied the traits of his mother that he despised most: alcoholism and perceived promiscuity.<sup>1</sup> He often met his victims in bars and later claimed they had "proven themselves unfaithful to their husbands, and so reminded him of his adulterous mother".<sup>1</sup> This process of projection allowed him to cast these women in the role of Vesta and then symbolically murder her, again and again.

This use of surrogates was a psychological necessity. To kill his actual mother would have been a final, singular act, extinguishing the rage that had come to define his existence. The surrogate mechanism allowed for an endless re-enactment of the matricide, providing a continuous, ritualistic release for a rage that was inexhaustible. The murder of the surrogate was the addiction; the rage for his mother was the substance.

## **Table 2: Victimology and Connection to Matricidal Rage**

Victim Name (Convicted Murders)	Circumstances of Encounter	Cole's Stated Justification/Perception	Method of Murder
Kathlyn J. Blum <sup>9</sup>	Prostitute met in Las Vegas. <sup>2</sup>	Embodied promiscuity, a trait hated in his mother.	Strangulation. <sup>9</sup>
Marie Cushman <sup>1</sup>	Met at a bar in Las Vegas. <sup>1</sup>	Reminded him of his mother's perceived infidelity.	Strangulation. <sup>1</sup>
Sally Thompson <sup>1</sup>	Killed in Dallas, Texas. <sup>9</sup>	Targeted due to lifestyle similarities with his mother.	Strangulation. <sup>9</sup>
Dorothy King <sup>1</sup>	Killed in Dallas, Texas. <sup>9</sup>	Targeted due to lifestyle similarities with his mother.	Strangulation. <sup>9</sup>
Wanda Roberts <sup>1</sup>	Killed in Dallas, Texas. <sup>9</sup>	Targeted due to lifestyle similarities with his mother.	Strangulation. <sup>9</sup>
Diana Pashal <sup>1</sup>	His second wife, an alcoholic barmaid. <sup>1</sup>	Strangled after a period of frequent arguments. <sup>1</sup>	Strangulation. <sup>1</sup>

## A System's Failure

Cole's violent progression was not inevitable; it was enabled by repeated failures of the institutions designed to prevent such outcomes. He was not a phantom who operated in the shadows but a man who repeatedly sought help, only to be dismissed.<sup>13</sup> In 1961, he flagged down a police car to confess his "urges to rape and strangle woman".<sup>4</sup> Despite being diagnosed with "Antisocial Sociopath Personality Disturbance" and "sadistic, abnormal sexual tendencies," he was recommended for discharge.<sup>2</sup> Most chillingly, a psychiatrist, Dr. Weiss, wrote the prescient note, "He seems to be afraid of the female figure and cannot have intercourse with her first but must kill her before he can do it," yet still approved Cole's

release.<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, a doctor dismissed his threats as mere manipulation to get a place to stay; Cole killed Essie Buck shortly after being discharged.<sup>2</sup>

This pattern of confession followed by inaction created a dangerous feedback loop. Each time Cole revealed his homicidal urges and was subsequently released, the system implicitly communicated that his thoughts were not truly dangerous or that it was powerless to stop him. This paradoxically validated his pathology and reinforced his belief that his violent destiny was inescapable. The institutional failure to contain him may have been interpreted as a form of permission, solidifying his murderous identity.

## Section 4: Psychological Profile and Criminological Significance

A synthesis of Carroll Cole's life, crimes, and confessions reveals a complex but clear psychological portrait. He was a man of high intelligence and profound psychopathology who understood his own monstrous nature with a chilling, detached clarity. His case remains of paramount importance to criminology, serving as a definitive and well-documented illustration of the developmental pathway from severe childhood abuse to serial homicide.

### A Portrait of a Psychopath

Despite the profound psychological damage inflicted upon him, multiple psychiatric evaluations determined that Cole was legally sane and competent to stand trial.<sup>9</sup> His profile is marked by several key traits:

- **Intellect and Manipulation:** Cole possessed a genius-level IQ of 152, an attribute he used not for constructive purposes but for manipulation.<sup>2</sup> His ability to convince mental health professionals of his harmlessness, only to kill immediately upon release, demonstrates a high degree of cunning and deceit characteristic of intelligent psychopaths.<sup>2</sup>
- **Core Psychopathic Traits:** Diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder, Cole exhibited a complete lack of remorse for his crimes.<sup>1</sup> He stated unequivocally, "I knew exactly what I was doing and I'm not sorry for what I did and I have no remorse".<sup>9</sup> This absence of guilt was coupled with a cold self-awareness. His declaration to the court, "There's nothing good about me," was not a plea for pity but a simple statement of fact from his perspective.<sup>9</sup>

- **Sexual Sadism and Paraphilias:** Cole's crimes were deeply rooted in sexual pathology. His wanderings were peppered with "sexual attacks, necrophilia, and cannibalization".<sup>5</sup> The observation by Dr. Weiss that Cole needed to kill his victims *before* engaging in sexual acts points to necrophilia as a primary paraphilia.<sup>1</sup> This allowed him to achieve sexual gratification only in a context of absolute power and control over a completely non-threatening female figure—a dead one.

This combination of high cognitive self-awareness and a total void of affective empathy presents the central paradox of Carroll Cole. He was intelligent enough to understand precisely *what* he was—a danger to every woman he met—but his psychopathy prevented him from *caring*. He understood his violent urges with a cold, detached clarity and ultimately accepted them as his immutable nature. This led him to seek his own execution not as a moral atonement, but as the logical and final chapter of his life's story.

## The Cole Case: A Definitive Study in Developmental Criminology

The case of Carroll Cole is of enduring significance to criminology because it provides an uncommonly transparent and well-documented example of the developmental pathway of a serial killer. Unlike cases with murky motivations or poorly recorded histories, Cole's life presents a clear, linear, and causal chain of events. A specific, gender-based form of maternal abuse created a specific matricidal obsession. This rage was first rehearsed on animals using the exact method—strangulation—that would become his signature. This behavior then "graduated" to human victims, who were carefully selected as surrogates for his mother.

His own articulate and consistent confessions provide a rare and invaluable window into the cognitions of a serial killer, validating many foundational theories of forensic psychology. His dramatic change in demeanor after his mother's death in 1984, when he abandoned all appeals and actively sought his own execution, offers a final, compelling piece of evidence.<sup>1</sup> With Vesta gone, the psychological engine of his rage was extinguished, and the surrogate-killing ritual that had defined his adult life became meaningless. By orchestrating his own death by the state, he was, in effect, killing the monstrous identity she had created. It was the only way left for him to "get even." His case remains a chilling and vital lesson on the catastrophic consequences of childhood trauma and the critical importance of recognizing and acting upon early warning signs of violence, particularly cruelty to animals.

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